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ABSTRACT

Western health officials believe that the incidence of HIV infection in the People's Republic of China is much higher than has been reported, but knowledge about the disease remains low. A preliminary study of Chinese college students' knowledge and beliefs about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and of the acceptability of mass media for AIDS education was conducted. Focus group interviews of 73 Xiamen University students showed that they used radio more consistently than any other media and viewed magazines as the best media source of health information. However, they expressed a general distrust of the health information that the media offer. The students possessed quite a bit of accurate information about AIDS but also harbored many inaccurate beliefs. Most felt that their personal risk from AIDS was very low because they felt distanced--either geographically or morally--from those at risk. A disturbing number felt that fate, not individual behavior, determines whether or not a person contracts HIV. (Contains 30 references and 4 notes). (Author/NKA)

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The Use of Mass Media for Health and AIDS Information Among Chinese College Students

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ABSTRACT

Western health officials believe the incidence of HIV infection in the People's Republic of China is much higher than has been reported, but knowledge about the disease remains low. This paper describes a preliminary study of Chinese college students' AIDS knowledge and beliefs and of the acceptability of mass media for AIDS education. Focus group interviews of 73 Xiamen University students showed that the students used radio more consistently than any other media and viewed magazines as the best media source of health information. However, they expressed a general distrust of the health information media offer. They possessed quite a bit of accurate information about AIDS but also harbored many inaccurate beliefs. Most felt that their personal risk from AIDS was very low because they felt distanced -- either geographically or morally -- from those at risk. Disturbing numbers felt that fate, not individual behavior, determines whether or not a person contracts HIV.

The Use of Mass Media for Health and AIDS Information Among Chinese College Students

By 1993, acquired immune deficiency syndrome had become truly a world-wide pandemic, bringing suffering, death and staggering health care expenses to countries throughout the world. According to the World Health Organization's Global AIDS Program, by June 30, 1993, 718,894 cases of AIDS had been reported worldwide, but due to underreporting and misidentification of some cases, WHO officials estimated that the number of AIDS cases was actually closer to 2.5 million. Nearly a third of those cases were in sub-Saharan Africa, North American had an estimated 1 million cases, and the South and Southeast Asia and Latin America/Caribbean regions each were believed to have approximately 1.5 million cases of HIV infection (American Association for World Health, 1993; World Health Organization, 1993).

One country that seems to have remained relatively untouched by AIDS, despite its enormous population and lack of modern health care facilities, is the People's Republic of China. As of Sept. 28, 1992, the Ministry of Public Health for the People's Republic of China had counted 932 carriers of HIV, including at least 11 cases of full-blown AIDS (Parker, 1992). Western health officials believe, however, that the actual incidence of Chinese infected with HIV is much higher; and concerns about AIDS in China will intensify as the number of HIV cases has nearly doubled in each of the past two years, "mirroring earlier situations in countries now at the centre of the world-wide pandemic" (Quinn, 1992). Furthermore, while the virus may be spreading in China, knowledge about the disease is not. Surveys of small, specialized groups of Chinese people -- including gay men, taxi drivers,

hotel workers, policemen and health workers -- suggest that most view AIDS as entirely a foreign problem and that understanding of the modes of transmission is low (Furlong, 1993; Leicester, 1992; Parker, 1992; Quinn, 1992).

The purpose of the qualitative research described in this paper was to enhance our understanding of Chinese college students' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about AIDS and HIV and of their use of and attitudes toward mass media as health information sources. Given that education remains the only viable tool for preventing or at least slowing the spread of HIV infection and given China's long and successful history of using mass media campaigns to promote social change, it seems crucial to begin to discover how mass media AIDS education and prevention efforts could be developed most effectively.

In its recently released collection of recommendations for evaluating AIDS prevention programs, the National Research Council has recommended that all future mass media campaigns be based on careful formative evaluation of the effectiveness of various channels and messages among different groups of receivers. In particular, the Council's media campaigns panel notes that campaign ideas must evaluate the concepts involved in campaign messages in the context of the lives of the people toward whom the messages will be directed (National Research Council, 1991). This study was a first step toward developing the baseline information necessary for conducting future, more widespread surveys of AIDS knowledge, attitudes and behaviors and of the use and acceptability of mass media channels for AIDS education efforts.

AIDS in China

Although, as noted earlier, the number of documented cases of HIV infection and AIDS in China remain low (Parker, 1992), many Western health officials are concerned that the actual number of people infected with HIV is much higher, particularly since testing for HIV is limited. Concern about the potential impact of AIDS in China has been heightened by the rapid increases in the numbers of HIV-positive individuals in other Asian countries. According to one report, for instance, in 1988, the number of people infected with HIV in Thailand was very low, but within four years, as many as several hundred thousand Thai people had been found to be infected, and HIV infection was particularly common among prostitutes. In India, approximately one million people now are estimated to be HIV positive (Wu, 1993).

Various international health organizations have estimated that between 5,000 and 15,000 people in China had been infected with HIV as of September 1993 (Jianhua and Yanlin, 1993). Although the Chinese government has maintained that IV drug use, not sexual activity, is the primary mode of transmission of HIV in China (Crothall, 1993), other government sources have indicated that about 80 percent of the HIV cases in China are among homosexuals; as many as 40 million homosexuals are estimated to live in China, driven underground by fear of imprisonment (Liu, 1993). The vast majority of China's HIV cases are from the Yunnan province, where opium and heroin are smuggled in from the "Golden Triangle" region of northern Burma (Chandra, 1993). A paper presented at the 1993 regional AIDS conference in Manila noted that while the rate of HIV infection through IV

drug use has stabilized in China, the number infected through sexual contact has increased every year (Jianhua and Yanlin, 1993).

Despite strict laws prohibiting prostitution in China, news reports indicate that the practice is flourishing, particularly in the coastal cities and in the southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. According to one report, more than 580,000 Chinese people have been arrested for prostitution since 1980, and Chinese officials acknowledge that the problem is likely to get worse because of increasing unemployment among rural young people who flock to the cities in search of work. Other contributors to the increase in prostitution include the affluence of some urban residents, increased contact with tourist and business travelers from outside China, changing sexual mores, and the opportunity to earn incomes far beyond anything legal employment offers (Sun, 1992).

International health experts believe HIV and AIDS will spread in China, particularly through high-risk behaviors such as needle-sharing activities, prostitution, multiple sex partners and increased availability of heroin (McGregor, 1992). Furthermore, due to a shortage of testing materials and medical personnel, only about 500,000 blood samples have been tested in China (Qi, 1992), and hospitals, particularly in the rural areas, still re-use syringes and needles repeatedly (BBC, 1990). Indeed, one recent article reported that even in the larger cities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen, disposable syringes often are re-used and sometimes are not sterilized for a day or even a week (*Chicago Tribune*, 1993).

Knowledge and beliefs about AIDS in China

The belief that HIV and AIDS are less common in Asia (and particularly in China) than in the United States and Africa, has led to a lack of concern about the disease among

Chinese people. A survey of 51 homosexual Chinese men reported that two-thirds were unaware of the AIDS threat, only 4 percent "knew a lot" about it, and only 6 percent used condoms (Quinn, 1992). One survey conducted by a member of China's National AIDS Commission showed that Beijing taxi drivers and hotel workers interviewed did not know that HIV can be transmitted through blood transfusions or IV injections or that using condoms provides protection against the virus (Chandra, 1993); gay men interviewed did not view AIDS as a threat. The researcher found that gay men associated AIDS with foreigners and believed that avoiding contact with foreigners would prevent them from contracting HIV (Quinn, 1992). In addition, many of China's estimated 250,000 drug addicts still reportedly are ignorant about the risks of sharing needles (Furlong, 1993). Even among government officials and health care professionals, misconceptions about the disease are widespread; a 1992 survey of doctors, government workers and police officers in Yunnan province showed that one-third thought the AIDS virus could be transmitted through casual contact and the same percentage believed mosquitoes can transmit the disease (Leicester, 1992).

AIDS education in China

So far, the Chinese government has not adequately addressed the issue of AIDS prevention through mass media, arguing that the conservative Chinese public will not accept frank messages about sexuality and drug abuse (Chandra, 1993). The disease itself is a sensitive topic in China because it involves behaviors considered taboo, such as homosexuality and IV drug use, or heterosexual behaviors considered too vulgar to discuss openly, such as condom use. Confucian ethics sanction sexuality only as it serves to perpetuate the family line; sexual expression outside marriage is seen as a threat to the

family's integrity. Homosexuality, according to this value system, precludes the fulfillment of filial piety. A child's homosexuality is seen as the end of the family, and similarly a child who dies before his parents is viewed as not fulfilling his responsibilities to the family (Aoki et al., 1989).

AIDS prevention messages also involve concepts of illness and death, which are also taboo subjects because discussing them is thought to bring bad luck or illness (Aoki et al., 1989). The notion of the self-fulfilling prophesy has contributed to Chinese folk beliefs that define everything related to blood and death as polluting (DeVos & Wagatsuma, 1986).

Despite the cultural taboos, some education efforts are being carried out in the southwestern province of Yunnan, an area near the Burma border that seems to have the highest numbers of HIV infections; however, in other areas, including the coastal areas where most of China's international trading is centered, the government has not attempted to inform Chinese citizens about HIV prevention (McGregor, 1992; Quinn, 1992). In addition, many segments of the government have contended that the spread of AIDS in China can be controlled by preventing HIV-infected people from entering the country and by quarantining Chinese people found to be infected (Leicester, 1992).

The Chinese mass media system

To understand the role mass media may play in educating Chinese citizens about health issues -- either through news coverage or through planned mass media campaigns -- it is important first to understand that all Chinese media serve as organs of the Communist Party. The Party's press philosophy flows from Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which

> emphasizes the effective manipulation of coercive and persuasive mass media as an instrument of power and control. Marxism-Leninism hold that the media are tools of class struggle and, as such, must assume such roles as collective propagandist, collective agitator, and collective organizer (Chang, 1989, p. 163).

Party officials believe that the primary role of the Chinese press is "to educate and awaken the people" in order to modernize the country. The press is regarded not as a profit-making enterprise but as an instrument for educating Chinese citizens; the Chinese mass media serve to publicize Party decisions, form a link between the Party and the masses, and to develop loyal and useful socialist citizens. The Department of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee determines policies and operational directives; the Party chain of command controls propaganda at the provincial, municipal, and local levels. Chinese journalists are required to study the principles of Marxism and Leninism, have a thorough understanding of Party lines, policies, and decisions, and follow the principles of "positive propaganda" (Chang, 1989).

These principles govern an extensive media system. Radio broadcasting has developed into the No. 1 mass medium in China (Chang, 1989). As of 1984, there were 122 local radio stations in China and 516 transmitting and relay stations in the country. Radio Beijing was broadcasting 138 hours worth of programming every day, in 38 foreign languages as well as in standard Chinese and four local dialects (Ministry of Radio and Television, 1984).

According to a report by the Ministry of Radio and Television (1984), more than 46 million TV sets were scattered across China. Television is more popular in the urban areas, but recently more and more farmers in the countryside have been able to afford to buy TV

sets (Chang, 1989). Every year, TV stations across China are capable of producing more than 300 TV plays and other entertainment programs, live broadcasts of sports events, and synchronized dubbing of foreign TV plays and feature films (Ministry of Radio and Television, 1984).

By 1985, China had 1,300 newspapers of all types; 36 were national, and the rest were provincial or municipal. Overall, the Chinese press has a daily circulation of more than 116 million copies, or 11.6 per 100 people. The major national newspapers or newspaper chains in China include the Xinhua News Agency, Worker's Daily (Gongren Ribao), People's Daily (Renmin Ribao), China Daily, The Liberation Army Daily (Jiefangjun Bao), The Chinese Peasant's Daily (Nongmin Bao), The Chinese Youth News (Zhongguo Qingnian Bao) and the World Economic Herald (Shijie Jingii Daobao) (Bishop, 1989).

By 1985, the number of magazine titles published in China was reported at 3,500, almost three times the number published six years earlier (Bishop, 1989).

Coverage of AIDS in Chinese media

As far as we could determine, no systematic study has been conducted of the coverage of AIDS in Chinese media or in foreign media reaching China, such as the Voice of American and British Broadcasting Corporation radio broadcasts. China has had a long and successful history of using mass media campaigns to promote social change, particularly in controlling birth rates. In its efforts to encourage the Chinese to accept a norm of one child per couple, the government used billboards, posters, magazines, newspapers, radio and particularly television. Interpersonal channels and monetary incentives have been used to reinforce the mass media messages (Brown, Waszak & Walsh-Childers, 1989).

Methods

During the summer of 1993, focus group interviews were conducted with 73 students from the Department of Journalism and Communication from Xiamen University in Xiamen, Fujian Province, in the People's Republic of China.[1] Each session included two to eight students, and each group included students who had in common gender, major and year in school. These students knew each other quite well because, under the Chinese system, they not only take classes together in the same sequence but also live together in their dormitory. The focus group sessions were conducted in the living room of the apartment in which the first authors were staying, so the atmosphere was quite casual.

At the beginning of each session, the participants were thanked for coming, and one of the investigators -- using a translator when necessary -- explained that the purpose of the questions was simply to find out what the participants thought and believed about certain subjects related to media use and to health. The session leader reminded them that we were interested in their opinions, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that although we would be taking notes about what they said, we did not have their names and would not be linking any comments to any individual student. The students were encouraged to discuss the questions and answers with each other as they wished.

Each session began with questions about the students' media use habits and preferences, including TV viewing, radio listening and newspaper and magazine reading. We then moved to questions about their use of and preferences among the various media as sources of information about health issues in general and then about AIDS specifically. Later in the session, the interviewer asked questions about their knowledge about AIDS, including

symptoms, transmission routes, treatments, and risk behaviors. The interviewer also asked about their beliefs about what should be done in regard to people with AIDS and testing for AIDS in the general population.

For the sessions involving students majoring in international journalism, both questions and answers normally were given in English. For sessions involving all other majors, one investigator asked the questions in English, and then the Chinese-speaking member of the team translated those questions into Chinese. These students usually replied in Chinese and had their answers translated, although some answered in English and made use of the translator only when they could not think of an appropriate word in English. During each session, one of the investigators was designated to be the primary interviewer while the other interviewer took notes and the Chinese-speaking team member served as translator. However, all three members of the team were free to ask questions when necessary for clarification or to get the students to expand on interesting comments.

After asking all of our questions, the primary interviewer offered the students the opportunity to add additional comments on any related topic or to ask questions. We answered the questions as accurately as possible and took notes about what questions had been asked. When the students had no more questions or comments or when the time for that session was over, we thanked them again for participating and explained our request that they not discuss the study with other students who might be scheduled to participate in later sessions. Comments made by some of the students in the later sessions indicated that this technique was mostly, but not entirely successful in preventing discussions between those who had and those who had not yet participated.

Results

Use of mass media

Television: All of the students indicated that they rarely watched television, primarily due to lack of access. There seemed to be only one television set for all of the students in the department, and the male students seemed to be more likely to have that set in their dormitory than the females. Some students indicated that they watched television for longer periods when they went home on holidays or when they visited with friends or relatives living nearby. Favorite types of shows included coverage of sports events, news and dramas.

Radio: Virtually all of the students owned a radio and reported spending a significant amount of time -- 30 minutes or more every day -- listening to the radio, often using earphones to avoid disturbing other students in their dormitory rooms. (Nine students share each room.) All groups reported listening to British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts regularly; some also reported listening to programs from the Chinese Broadcasting Company in Taiwan. They listen to the radio for news, Western and Asian popular and rock music and classical music; many said they listen to news and current affairs programming in English to help them improve their English-listening and -speaking abilities. Most reported that radio is an important information source.

Newspapers: Most students read newspapers regularly, if not every day, although some said they do not have much opportunity to read newspapers. The most commonly mentioned newspapers were the *Xiamen Daily*, *China Daily* and a paper called *Reference News*. The students said they are most likely to read international news stories, although

some also read sports stories, and some mentioned specialty newspapers that contained only stories about soccer.

Magazines: Because they have so little spending money, few students reported buying magazines very often. However, they do occasionally buy magazines, which they read and then share with friends and classmates. They also read magazines in the communication department's reading room.

The most frequently mentioned specific magazine was the Chinese *Reader's Digest*. Some students reported reading news magazines or specialty magazines related to photography, music, entertainment or sports, and many of the advertising majors reported reading advertising industry trade magazines, especially *Advertising Age*. Interestingly, both women and men reported that they occasionally read a magazine called *Girl's Friend*, which one woman explained carried articles "about careers and famous movie stars and love." The men who read the magazine said it helps them learn about women.

Use of mass media for health information

The students reported that they found health information in all of the media. There was disagreement about which medium was the best source of health information, although magazines generally seemed to be regarded as the best source, particularly health specialty magazines such as *Family Doctor*, which was mentioned by nearly every group.

In general, however, the students did not seem to get much health-related information from mass media, for a variety of reasons. The first, and probably most important, was the relatively consistent lack of interest in health information or health issues. Many of the students explained that, because they are young, they feel no need to pay attention to health

information, which they regard as being primarily of interest and of use to old people. Some of the women were interested in articles about how to keep their skin healthy and attractive, and some of the men reported reading articles about how to improve their performance in favorite sports through nutrition and exercise. Overall, however, the students seemed to have little interest in health information and seemed somewhat surprised that anyone would expect them to be interested in these issues.

A second reason for the lack of interest in mass media health information was that the students seemed to prefer interpersonal sources for obtaining the information they needed. When asked which sources they would use if they wanted information about a specific health problem, most said they would ask friends or relatives for information or, if the problem was serious, would seek advice from a doctor or health clinic.

Finally, several students reported a general distrust of the health information to be found in mass media. They complained that one might read certain information in a newspaper one day but find contradictory or conflicting information about the same subject in another newspaper, magazine or broadcast story the next day. Given what they perceived as a lack of consistency in media health information, they would choose more trusted sources such as relatives or health workers if they wanted health information.

Use of mass media for AIDS information

Despite the general lack of interest in mass media articles about health, the mass media clearly were the students' primary source of information about AIDS. There was disagreement about whether the Chinese media carried many stories about AIDS. Some students said they saw a great deal of information about AIDS in the mass media, but others

said the media do not cover AIDS much because the disease is not a problem in China. Students mentioned seeing or hearing stories about how AIDS is transmitted and how it can be prevented, and some said they had read or heard from the media that Chinese researchers have been working to find a cure for AIDS through the use of Chinese traditional medicine techniques. Several students mentioned having read magazine articles that included photographs of people with AIDS, which led them to conclude that the disease is "very terrible." Others said they had seen or heard stories about an AIDS information hotline in Beijing and the establishment of gender-segregated centers, also in Beijing, for people concerned that they might have contracted the disease.

All generally agreed that both print and broadcast AIDS-related articles, when they do appear, focus on AIDS issues in other countries, not in China. Most also agreed that they are most interested in articles that talk about which foreign celebrities have been infected with AIDS but that they're less interested in other kinds of articles about AIDS because, as one young man said, "It has nothing to do with us." As with health issues in general, some students said the AIDS stories they have seen or heard have provided conflicting information. One female advertising student commented, "AIDS exists on the mainland, but maybe the mass media don't give much accurate data about AIDS, so it is necessary to get as much information as possible."

The consensus among the students seemed to be that the Chinese media are providing people with adequate information about AIDS -- not because the coverage is frequent, extensive or consistent but, most students said, because the Chinese people really do not need to know much about AIDS, which they regard as a foreign problem. A significant minority,

however, said the media are not providing enough coverage of AIDS. Their comments included complaints that stories about AIDS are too scattered, too infrequent and that the information contained in those articles is too basic.

Knowledge about AIDS

Despite the relatively sparse coverage of AIDS and the fairly common belief that Chinese people do not need to be concerned or informed about AIDS, the students knew quite a bit about the disease. When asked about symptoms of the disease, most groups were able to describe, in non-technical terms, such signs as blotches or spots on the skin, dramatic weight loss, swollen glands, respiratory diseases and susceptibility to other diseases or infections due to the weakening or loss of the immune system. Some students acknowledged, however, that they might be confusing symptoms of AIDS with those of other diseases, particularly other sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis. They also generally were aware that a person who had developed AIDS was certain or nearly certain to die but that there are medications AIDS patients may take to help them fight the disease.

None of the students we interviewed believed they would be able to tell by looking at another person if he or she was infected with AIDS. Many were aware that a person could be infected with the disease for many months, potentially for years, without showing symptoms. Several mentioned spontaneously that they had learned this through stories about American basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson. Most knew that there is a test that can determine whether or not an individual is infected, although only four or five students had any idea what HIV meant. In many of the groups, none of the students ever had heard the

term HIV; in others, they had heard of the term but did not understand what it was or how it was connected to AIDS.

When asked how AIDS is transmitted, the students generally gave relatively accurate answers; they knew that the disease or virus could be transmitted through homosexual and heterosexual sexual activity, through sharing dirty needles, through blood transfusions and that the virus could be transmitted from a mother to her baby during pregnancy. Many said they had learned that the disease could not be transmitted through casual contact. They knew that homosexuals, prostitutes and their customers, IV drug users and people who had to receive blood transfusions were particularly at risk. In virtually every group, someone mentioned that Yunnan province was the area of China in which AIDS is spreading most rapidly.

Perhaps not surprisingly, however, in addition to the accurate information, the students also seemed to have acquired significant amounts of misinformation. For instance, one male advertising major indicated that AIDS "can be cured through vaccination" and said that many Chinese scholars had been abroad to work on developing this vaccine. A senior male international journalism student said he had heard that "in an African country, they have a herb to cure a small child" with AIDS. Other students in this same group said that AIDS could be transmitted through kissing or touching the skin of an infected person or by sharing cooking or eating utensils or towels with an infected person, and at least one group expressed concern that they might be able to contract the disease by giving blood. A group of female advertising students in their third year pointed out that many people believe sexual relations are the only way in which AIDS/HIV can be transmitted because the first character

of the Chinese word for AIDS also means "love." Some felt that the risk groups included all Asian blacks and anyone who had been abroad (outside China) or who had frequent contact with foreigners;[2] at least one female telecommunications student said AIDS is present in all people but only "shows up" in some.

Personal risk

Virtually all of the students we interviewed seemed shocked that we even would ask whether they believed anyone they personally knew ever would contract HIV or AIDS. The overwhelming theme pervading their answers to this kind of question was a sense of distance -- the idea that they were protected from AIDS by geographic, cultural and moral separation from those at risk. Many of the students expressed the belief that AIDS was a significant problem in foreign countries, particularly the United States and Africa, but not a great concern in China. One female international journalism student commented, for example, "We all think AIDS is very far away from us," and a third-year male journalism student stated emphatically, "In China, people do not have this disease." A male advertising student said that, "AIDS in China is still far away. We can hear mention of the disease once in a while, but we're not too concerned because it is too far away."

Few students expressed any concern about contracting AIDS through blood transfusions, although they knew this was a transmission route. They believed the risk would be great if one received blood products in the United States but said China's blood supply was not infected. A female telecommunications student said AIDS "is not widespread in our nation. My father is a doctor, and he has not heard if blood has been infected." A male

journalism student argued that blood transfusions were safe because Chinese hospitals sterilize their needles with heat and alcohol.

Some students acknowledged that AIDS is becoming a problem in some areas of China -- but not in Fujian province, where they live. "It's certain that in the south mainland of China, it's a problem," said one female advertising student. Another said, "In tropical areas like Yunnan Province, close to Burma and Thailand, there is more of a problem than here. AIDS will be transmitted (meaning 'will spread') quickly in these areas. Thailand has more tourists and prostitutes."

Some students were willing to admit that AIDS could even be present in Fujian province and in Xiamen itself, but they said they were safe as long as they stayed on campus. "We are students, teachers," explained one female advertising student. "We know all the people we are in contact with all the time, so we are safe. We know all of us well." Students in this group said, however, that the risk of AIDS would be greater if one ventured into downtown Xiamen. "People in hotels, for example, have been everywhere, and they can be easily infected through towels."

The students also generally felt protected from AIDS through cultural and moral distance from those at risk. A first-year male journalism student commented that, "Chinese people are not like foreigners. We don't have many homosexuals, prostitutes or drug addicts. AIDS will not be a problem in China because Chinese society is more traditional. It is a special culture that has lasted 2,000 years." A male advertising student said people in China had no need to take steps to avoid AIDS because "sexual abuses are not a problem in China."

Although the consensus clearly was that AIDS is not a threat in China, there were significant numbers of students who disagreed. "AIDS is approaching with each passing day," one female advertising student said, and another argued that AIDS is not far away because Xiamen has "a seamy side of life, too -- prostitutes and drug addicts." Female telecommunications students expressed concern that "the numbers are in the thousands in China who do not know they have the disease" and that "disease and prevention units don't work so well. There are many reports that AIDS has spread in China." Several students felt that AIDS would become an increasing concern for China as the country's interaction with foreigners grows.

Avoidance of AIDS

The focus group participants mentioned most of the accepted practices for protecting themselves from AIDS -- including not using IV drugs, making certain their partners were not infected and using condoms during sexual intercourse (although condom use was mentioned in only two of the 12 groups).[3] One student also noted that a person concerned about contracting AIDS through a blood transfusion could donate his or her own blood before it was needed to ensure an untainted transfusion. By far the most commonly advocated behavior, however, was simply "behaving" oneself, which the students explained meant that one should not have a "loose life."

Somewhat disturbingly, on the other hand, many students expressed the belief that there is nothing a person can do to protect himself or herself from AIDS. "If you are destined to get AIDS there is no way to prevent it. It is just fate," one male advertising student said. Another male advertising student said that whether or not one gets AIDS

"depends on whether you are lucky or not. You can't do anything."

Several students also expressed the belief that even if AIDS is cured, another disease will develop to take its place. "We believe that AIDS will be cured in the future, but then some other disease will take the place," a male advertising student said. A male international journalism student expressed the same belief: "We will defeat it, like pneumonia, through science and technology. But when this is cured, another (disease) will appear." Students from two groups said AIDS is part of nature's way of keeping everything "in balance."

In summary, then, the students we interviewed used radio more often and consistently than any other media and viewed magazines, generally, as the best media source of health information. However, they expressed a general distrust of what they perceived as the conflicting health information media offer. They possessed quite a bit of accurate information about AIDS symptoms, transmission and prevention but also harbored many inaccurate beliefs that AIDS could be transmitted through casual contact. Most felt that their personal risk from AIDS was very low because they felt distanced -- either geographically or morally -- from those at risk. Disturbing numbers felt that fate -- not individual or societal action -- will determine whether or not a person contracts HIV.

Study limitations

Although the interviews provide interesting information about Chinese college students' knowledge and beliefs about AIDS, the methods employed naturally limit the generalizability of the findings, even among Chinese college students. The participants all were students in the Department of Journalism and Communications, and although they believed their media use to be similar to that of other Xiamen University students, it may

well be that these students spend more time attending to media because of their majors. They also may tend to be more critical of media because of their studies in the field. Even if these participants' views were representative of other students from their university, the chances are good that students at other universities could differ. We find some reassurance, however, in the fact that these students views tended to reflect what other researchers have found in surveys of other populations in China (Chandra, 1993; Leicester, 1992; Quinn, 1992).

Another concern is that the students, unaccustomed to discussing such taboo topics among themselves, let alone in the presence of strangers, may have answered less candidly, particularly to questions about their perceptions of their own risk. Under the circumstances, it seems unlikely that any student would have been willing to express fear of contracting the disease. Again, however, their low perceptions of personal risk seem consistent with other researchers findings -- even among college students in the United States.

Because these students spend so much of their lives together, it may be that a kind of "group-think" develops, and that may have increased the homogeneity of their answers. On the other hand, on some subjects, students vehemently disagreed with each other -- particularly about whether people in China or in Xiamen needed to be concerned about AIDS and whether a person could contract the disease through casual contact.

Discussion

On World AIDS Day in December 1992, Chinese health officials and state-run newspapers advised Chinese people not to use condoms for disease prevention, to avoid kissing, and to "stay clean and look after themselves" (Wenfeng, 1992). Meanwhile, during the event, World Health Organization experts warned that China urgently needed to develop

a national AIDS campaign to prevent a massive epidemic. For the next several months, the National Health Education Institute, under the leadership of Chen Bingzhong, established several AIDS hotlines, encouraged a new gay men's support group to participate in public health campaigns, and planned to implement a nationwide condom distribution drive. In August 1993, however, Bingzhong was fired for promoting AIDS education for homosexuals. As noted earlier, the official Chinese government stance is that, in China, the only significant mode of HIV transmission is IV drug use (Crothall, 1993).

Assuming that the Chinese government will continue to deny that sexual contact -- either homosexual or heterosexual -- plays a significant role in the spread of AIDS in China, and given that the government controls all media, any discussion of plans for mass media AIDS education campaigns in China may seem to be relatively pointless. Indeed, even if China's media were free to print and broadcast whatever news or advertising they wished, media-centered AIDS education and prevention campaigns might well have little effect in the absence of government policies that would support individuals' efforts to educate and protect themselves. Both Milio (1985) and Wallack (1990) have argued that health campaigns aimed at changing individuals' behaviors by providing them with appropriately packaged information have very little success. As Wallack has written, "Information is necessary but not sufficient for creating meaningful change" (1990, p. 155).

The most important step in helping China control the spread of AIDS, then, would be to persuade government policymakers to acknowledge and address the presence of homosexual activity and prostitution in China. Only then will organizations from within

China or from other countries be able to begin officially sanctioned education efforts to control the sexual transmission of AIDS.

Nonetheless, comparison of the results of the present study to the tenets of the health belief model suggest some AIDS-related issues mass media campaigns might be able to address usefully but without conflicting with official government policy. According to the health belief model, major determinants of individuals' decisions to adopt healthy behaviors include their perceptions of the seriousness of a disease, their perceptions of their own personal susceptibility to that disease and their perceptions of their ability to take action that will protect them from the disease. Our study indicates that while these students are convinced about the seriousness of AIDS, they do not perceive themselves to be at risk; in addition, significant numbers of them believe fate, not personal action, will determine whether or not they are infected. A two-pronged program of reducing fear by providing information about how AIDS is *not* transmitted while increasing people's awareness of the potential AIDS threat to China would provide much-needed information and would fall within cultural and legal prescriptions.

Further, education efforts could be developed that would encourage young people, like the college students we interviewed, to recognize that their youth does not protect them from AIDS. News reports or public service advertising that simply emphasized the youthfulness of most people infected with HIV, particularly within China, could help them to assess their own risk more realistically.

Persuading Chinese people that they can reduce their risk of getting AIDS may be more difficult for both cultural and political reasons. First, the belief that fate or luck

determine whether a person will be infected is likely to work against acceptance of risk-reduction advice. Secondly, both government policy and cultural decorum likely would preclude the use of Western-style AIDS prevention campaigns urging people to discuss their partners' sexual history or negotiate safe sex practices. However, at least some of the students we interviewed mentioned using condoms, having a monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner and not sharing needles as actions people could take to protect themselves from AIDS. This suggests that some people will learn measures they can take to protect themselves even when those measures are discussed only in the context of what Western countries' health experts recommend.[4] Thus, news coverage of Western AIDS prevention efforts may be useful in persuading people that they can take steps to protect themselves from AIDS.

Assuming that agencies within or from outside China receive government approval to conduct an AIDS education campaign through mass media, our study suggests some recommendations. First, the widespread and frequent use of radio among the students we interviewed suggests that, at least for a campaign aimed specifically at college students, radio is likely to be the most effective medium, with magazines also offering promise. In addition, campaign planners should take care that, to the extent possible, campaign messages provide consistent information. Our interviewees indicated that finding conflicting information about health issues often caused them to ignore or reject any of the messages. Therefore it seems important that the information Chinese people receive about AIDS is as accurate and consistent as possible.

The results of this study suggest that improving the understanding of AIDS among Chinese health care workers and among campus leaders through either mediated or interpersonal channels could make a significant impact on AIDS knowledge among Chinese college students. The students we interviewed indicated that if they wanted additional information about a health issue, they would seek it from health authorities or friends.

Finally, one point that arose in our focus groups suggests that selected foreign media channels may be useful in increasing knowledge about AIDS and awareness of how the disease threatens Chinese people, even without Chinese government approval. Virtually all of the students we interviewed mentioned listening to Voice of America and British Broadcasting Corporation radio programs, and they told us this practice was not limited to communications students. These students said that because all Chinese college students must pass an English test, most spend hours listening to English-language programming in an effort to improve their skills. Thus, AIDS-related programming included in these broadcasts -- particularly those that included discussion of AIDS in China -- could help educate college students about the disease.

As of September 1993, the number of HIV cases worldwide was estimated at 15 million, according to a World Health Organization report. By the year 2000, health experts expect the number of people infected to surge to between 40 million and 110 million. WHO officials say the exact figure will depend largely on how the epidemic behaves in Asia. It seems obvious, then, that regardless of the difficulties involved, health workers -- either from China or from other nations -- must take action to slow the spread of the disease among the 1.15 billion residents of the world's most populous country.

[1]Xiamen University was selected because of the authors' contacts there. However, knowledge and beliefs about AIDS among college students in Xiamen seemed particularly interesting because the city has been identified in news reports as a potential problem area. One report, datelined from Xiamen, noted that the resurgence of prostitution in China has been particularly rapid in Xiamen because it is a coastal city and one of China's five "Special Economic Zones," areas designated as free-market laboratories (Sun, 1992). Another article cited a report in China Disaster Reduction News that mentioned Xiamen as a city in which health inspectors found disposable needles being reused, often without being sterilized (*Chicago Tribune*, 1993).

[2]The argument that people who travel outside China or have extensive contacts with foreigners may not be totally inaccurate, given the higher known incidence of AIDS in other countries and the fact that increased interaction with foreigners likely would increase the chances that the person would have sexual contact or share IV drug needles with an infected person. However, our discussions with the students strongly suggested that they were not talking about interaction with foreigners leading to sexual contact or drug use; rather many seemed to believe that more frequent contact of <u>any</u> kind with foreigners increased a person's AIDS risk.

[3]It seems important to note, however, that most students approached this question as purely hypothetical. Few seemed to feel that <u>they</u> personally needed to worry about such practices because they believed their risks were so low.

[4]One male student, for instance, noted that the use of condoms was advocated as an AIDS-prevention measure in Western countries and added, "it's probably a good idea here, too."

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